

Mental Health Matters Takes Center Stage

More than 1,000 backpacks displayed around the lawn at the State Capitol served as a reminder of the many young lives lost to suicide each year.

The solemn display – some with photos of college students who have taken their lives – helped set the stage for the annual Mental Health Matters Day at the Capitol May 23. The event is sponsored in part by the California Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month.

Paul Gilmartin, host of the Mental Illness Happy Hour podcast, served as emcee. Becky Fein, program director for Send Silence Packing, and Nadia Ghaffari, founder of TeenzTalk spoke at the event, which also featured Darryl McDaniels of the Run-DMC hip hop group as keynote speaker.

McDaniels discussed his struggles with mental illness -- fear of abandonment, suicidal thoughts, and alcoholism -- sometimes breaking into rap.



McDaniels and Paul Gilmartin.

“There’s no DMC without Darryl,” he said. “All people see is first to go gold, first to go platinum, first on the cover of Rolling Stone, first on MTV, first non-athlete with the sneaker deals. That’s what the world was seeing. In the midst of all of that, I’m suppressing who I really am. I’m suppressing my feelings.”

McDaniels’ talk was delivered as a Question and Answer session with Gilmartin facilitating the discussion. McDaniels clearly wowed the noontime crowd of about 800 people who stopped by at the

event throughout the day. Commissioner Gladys Mitchell, Senator Jim Beall and other lawmakers also attended.

The color of mental health awareness – lime green – was visible everywhere. Attendees sported green scarfs and shirts and the stage was decorated in mostly green and blue balloons. Send Silence Packing was responsible for the poignant backpacks display.

“It’s important for us to spread the message that in fact stigma is very low and it’s ok to not be ok,” Fein said. “All of us can play a part in supporting people around us who are struggling. This certainly applies when someone is in a crisis and needs immediate support. And it’s true every day, too. We all struggle sometimes and it helps when someone shows that they care.”

Ghaffari, a high school senior and mental health advocate, began her speech by asking the audience to close their eyes and raise their hands

if they or a loved one had experienced mental health issues. Nearly everyone raised their hands.



Backpacks representing young lives lost.

“I wanted to create some sort of platform, some sort of movement to tell all young people that it’s really ok to ask for help and that there are really many resources to get help,” Nadia said. “After many conversations with local resources and organizations, I launched TeenzTalk which is also a 501(3) nonprofit organization. This is for young people to share their stories and fight the stigma.”

TeenzTalk also strives to harness the power of peer connections because research shows that teens are more likely to listen to other teens about what they’re going through, Nadia said. TeenzTalk also features state and national resources for anyone who needs help.

Ana B. Gutierrez, a peer coach from San Francisco, said she felt empowered by the speakers.

“I got so much out of the camaraderie of the day,” she said. “I’m finding out that there are many more people who have issues, not the same issues, but similar. They face heavy-duty challenges so much heavier than others and that helped me tremendously that if they can overcome their issues, so can I.”

Teressa Dane, of the White House Counseling Center in Carmichael, attended the event for work. She said it was her second time attending the annual gathering.

“As someone with mental health issues, someone with children who have mental health issues and someone who works with children and adults with mental health issues, it’s great to see that it has grown as much as it has. To hear people discussing this issue and putting it out there is phenomenal! Hopefully, there will be more and more and more!”

McDaniels went into great detail about the many issues that contributed to his mental illness. He felt many pressures following his success as a rapper. He said he could relate to some super heroes because like him, they often lived double lives and like him, they were adopted. The void and isolation he felt began to consume him until he decided to ask for help.



Ana B. Gutierrez (in black shirt) waits in line to talk to DMC.



Teressa Danes enjoyed the discussion.



Nadia Ghaffari of TeenzTalk.

“Along my journey, the most powerful so-called gangster thing, the most gangster thing that could ever happen to me came my way and that was therapy,” he said. “But I didn’t find therapy until I had the courage to go help myself to go to rehab to stop drinking. I got to the point where I started to see that what these people are telling me isn’t my truth. And the only reason I’m drinking is to live up to their expectations. But if I keep drinking, I’m going to be dead before I get anything accomplished.”

McDaniels said he finally came to the realization that his life experiences led him to his true calling: to talk about his struggles to help remove the stigma and try to save lives. “If you don’t admit how you feel, whether good or bad, you never heal,” he said.



Senator Jim Beall chats with DMC.



Commissioner Gladys Mitchell and DMC.



MHSOAC staff helped at the event.



Green was the color of the day for MHSOAC staff.